

# EVOLVING MORAL KNOWLEDGE

by

ALLAN GIBBARD



The Lindley Lecture  
The University of Kansas  
March 12, 2009

The E. H. Lindley Memorial Lectureship Fund was established in 1941 in memory of Ernest H. Lindley, Chancellor of the University of Kansas from 1920 to 1939. In February 1941 Mr. Roy Roberts, the chairman of the committee in charge, suggested in the *Graduate Magazine* that

the Chancellor should invite to the University for a lecture or a series of lectures, some outstanding national or world figure to speak on "Values of Living" -- just as the late Chancellor proposed to do in his courses "The Human Situation" and "Plan for Living."

In the following June Mr. Roberts circulated a letter on behalf of the Committee, proposing in somewhat broader terms that

The income from this fund should be spent in a quest of social betterment by bringing to the University each year outstanding world leaders for a lecture or series of lectures, yet with a design so broad in its outline that in the years to come, if it is deemed wise, this living memorial could take some more desirable form.

The fund was allowed to accumulate until 1954, when Professor Richard McKeon lectured on "Human Rights and International Relations." The next lecture was given in 1959 by Professor Everett C. Hughes, and has been published by the University of Kansas School of Law as part of his book *Student's Culture and Perspectives: Lectures on Medical and General Education*. The selection of lectures for the Lindley series has since been delegated to the Department of Philosophy.

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The second creation story in the Hebrew-Christian Bible, I expect, is familiar to us all. Adam and Eve disobey God and eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Eating the fruit gives them knowledge of good and evil, as evidenced by their wanting not to be seen naked, and it is only then that sex enters human life.

Nineteenth century geologists in Britain started out convinced that everything in the Christian Bible was literal truth, truth of the kind that science pursues. They found, though, that they couldn't reconcile the rock layers and fossils they studied with such a view. Darwin subsequently devised a naturalistic framework for explaining the changes in species that the rock layers had revealed and the features of plants and animals that look intricately designed. The upshot of these familiar developments, though, has been a puzzle. We do seem to know good from evil—not always but often. Still, the hard scientific work of many investigators tells us that our genetic makeup is a product of natural selection, and an organism's genes act, as it were, as a recipe for making an organism. An organism, in consequence of all this, looks amazingly as if it were designed. Eyes, for instance, seem amazingly as if they had been designed for seeing. We are not, in any literal sense, designed and manufactured, but it is much as if we had been. And what are we, as it were, designed to do? Ultimately, to proliferate our genes in later generations, under the conditions of our ancestors. That is the answer that evolutionary theory gives. This answer, though, is hard to reconcile with any ordinary view of ourselves. Why, among other things, would such a design build in us a capacity to know good and evil?

I must hasten to add that a story of our knowledge will need to include social history. Darwinian selection of genes did shape the propensities a human baby starts out with, the baby's genetic recipes and the designs these are recipes for. With the child and the adult, however, genetic selection is only part of the story. The child and the adult are the ways they are not only because of their genetic design, but because of all sorts of social interactions as the person develops through childhood and adulthood to the end of life. Norwegians speak Norwegian of various kinds, and Greeks speak Greek, but not because their genes differ. We learn and pick up aspects of our culture, such as language, from those around us. Likewise

with morals: headhunters have moral views that are vastly different from those of anyone in this room. (Or perhaps we shouldn't call these views precisely moral, but they do seem to think it all right, and indeed glorious, to kill people to garner their heads.)

We can't, though, think of our minds and conduct as having genetic aspects and social aspects. Many significant aspects of us are due to both in interaction. We learn throughout life, and that's because our genes designed us, as it were, for learning of various kinds. Take language as a prime example: As our ancestors over the generations did more and more of the things that are now involved in speaking and understanding a language, selection pressures favored various proto-linguistic competences. Proto-language changed over the generations hand in hand with proto-linguistic competence. An ancestor of 4000 generations ago, say, wasn't equipped, genetically, to speak all of the proto-language of ancestors 1000 generations later. Evolutionists talk of "co-evolution" of such things as proto-language and genetic proclivities for proto-language. The upshot, highly abbreviated, is this: we are genetically designed to respond in systematic ways to social cues, in such realms as language and ethos. These responses are what we call learning and acculturation, along with invention, wit, creativity, and the like. History and culture we can see as aspects of human ecology, patterns of interactions of organisms whose initial proclivities are designed, as it were, into the genes.

Back, then, to how our ethical natures fit into such a picture. Can we accept a scientific account of our nature along such lines and still regard ourselves as capable of moral thinking and moral knowledge? I'll be arguing that perhaps we can, and arguing for a particular way of trying to fit our view of ourselves as moral beings into an evolutionary and ecological view of ourselves. I won't be saying much about how evolutionary theory might help explain our proclivities to moral judgment, although that is a fascinating and important question and there is a great deal of work on it that well deserves discussion. Today, though, I'll just suppose that it can, and ask the philosophical question of whether the states that figure in such an explanation might qualify as knowledge.

### **Expressivism and Non-naturalism**

Philosophers from Socrates on have disputed what we mean when we make ethical statements. In this lecture, I'll of course have to skip over most of the issues that come up in these debates, but I'll take up two kinds of positions. My own is called "expressivistic", and the other is sometimes called "non-naturalistic". Expressivists and non-naturalists alike reject another kind of position called "analytical naturalism", which



holds that ethical claims can be put in terms fit to incorporate into empirical sciences like psychology. The claim "I must go," for instance, doesn't mean that I plan to go, since you could agree that I plan to go but reject my protestation that I must go.

Let's begin with some terminological housekeeping. Ethical claims are part of a larger category of claims that are called normative. These include, for example, the claims of normative epistemology, which asks what beliefs are warranted. The realm of the normative, we can say, is the "oughty", or as Wilfrid Sellars put it, whatever is "fraught with ought". Many questions about morality really pertain to the normative realm in general. I favor a proposal of A.C. Ewing many decades ago: in effect, that we can analyze this range of claims as containing a special, primitive concept of ought.<sup>1</sup> This concept comes both in permissive and mandatory versions, and I'll use the term 'warranted' for the permissive one, and for the mandatory one, 'ought' or 'must'. Alternatively, we could say that the basic concept involved is that of a reason, in the sense of a reason to do such-and-such or to believe such-and-such.<sup>2</sup> Then we can talk of having sufficient reason or conclusive reason, with the first permissive and the second mandatory. These terms are, I think, all interdefinable, and it won't matter which we take as basic. Using the concept of warrant, we can say things like this: An act is morally wrong if a person who contemplates doing it ought to feel a moral aversion to it. Here by a moral aversion, I mean a certain familiar guilt-tinged feeling toward doing it. (I owe this proposal to Howard Nye.)

Begin with non-naturalism, then. Non-naturalists say that warrant is a non-natural property. Nothing further can be said; the property is simple in the sense of having no components. An alternative version would distinguish properties and concepts of properties, and say that the concept WARRANT is simple and non-naturalistic.<sup>3</sup> I prefer this version, but I won't argue the case here. T. M. Scanlon takes what I am calling a non-naturalistic view, but with the concept REASON TO as basic. A reason to do something, he tells us, is a consideration that counts in favor of doing it, and nothing further can be said to define the notion.<sup>4</sup>

Many of us find non-naturalism baffling. I do take myself to understand talk of reasons to do a thing, or of acts or beliefs as warranted. I am puzzled, though, why I should think that the universe contains properties that are non-natural, or why non-naturalistic concepts would be legitimate parts of our thinking. I don't want to give up normative concepts, but I do have a right to be puzzled. How could I have gained knowledge of a non-naturalistic subject matter?

Non-naturalists have long responded that mathematics raises the same questions. We think mathematically, although mathematics is a matter of

necessary truths and not an empirical part of the natural world. Still, the more elementary parts of mathematics, like arithmetic and geometry, are closely involved with empirical knowledge. When we collect and count pebbles, we depend on the deliverances of arithmetic. Mathematical Platonists claim that in mathematics, we apply a kind of insight that is of much the same kind as some ethical non-naturalists claim, and thereby learn about, among other things, properties of infinite sets that are far removed from any applications to the familiar world. These claims, though, I think, need scrutiny. The clearly legitimate parts of mathematics raise no great puzzle for the abilities of evolved organisms to grasp them.

I'll now sketch my own, expressivistic answer, which in a nutshell goes like this: Pretty much everything non-naturalists say in elucidating their position is right, properly understood. Still, there's more to be had by way of explanation than they give. The key to our ability to wield non-naturalistic concepts is that these concepts are directive. Their role is to figure in action and the like. Since we evolved to act and to be intelligent about it, we evolved to have directive concepts. The prime biological function of these concepts is to figure in thinking what to do.

I'll sketch this approach only quickly, with the aim, eventually, of getting back to moral knowledge. In my 2003 book *Thinking How to Live*, I began with the slogan that oughts or musts are plans. Believing I must leave at noon amounts to planning to leave at noon. This can at best be rough, however. Aren't beliefs, after all, quite different from plans? Also, not all normative beliefs are as straightforwardly tied to plans as is the belief that I must leave at noon. Take for instance, the claim, "Either it's not yet noon or I must leave now". To believe this isn't yet to plan whether to leave now. My slogan that musts are plans at the very least needs refinement.

Here is a second and much better approximation: Normative beliefs are restrictions. Take again the claim that either it's not yet noon or I must leave now. To believe this is to rule out a combination of states of mind: I rule out the combination, disbelieving that it's not yet noon and rejecting planning to leave now. More generally, a normative belief restricts one to certain combinations of naturalistic belief and plan. This second approximation is what I'll be discussing—though I'll introduce some further refinements in the course of my discussion.

### **Earmarks of the Cognitive**

T. M. Scanlon is a non-naturalist, in the terminology I am using, and he has criticized the expressivistic theory of normative judgments I am sketching. When you and I disagree on some normative issue, Scanlon



says, the issue between us is at base this: “whether a certain consideration is or is not a reason for some attitude.” He continues,

The answer to this question is, I am drawn toward saying, something that is properly expressed in the assertoric mode, is capable of being true, and can be the object of belief.<sup>5</sup>

These, he says, are earmarks of the cognitive. Now this is quite right for the bald slogan that musts are plans. How does it apply, though, to the claim that normative beliefs are restrictions of the kind I am proposing? Such restrictions have the earmarks of the “cognitive” that Scanlon cites and more. We can start out as expressivists and interpret, explain, and indeed accept many of the things that a “normative realist” like Scanlon claims. The view that we can do this is known as “quasi-realism”, a term coined by Simon Blackburn.<sup>6</sup>

If normative beliefs are restrictions of the kind I am proposing, I claim, they will have the marks of the cognitive that Scanlon lists. Can they be expressed in the assertoric mode? I just explained how we can voice one such restriction with the declarative sentence, “It’s not yet noon or I must leave.” What licenses me to do such a thing is the way restrictions or rulings-out combine freely into negations, disjunctions and the like. Declarative syntax allows just this. To accept a negation, for instance, is to rule out accepting what’s negated. What, then, of truth? So long as we can agree or disagree with such states, anyone who plans can properly regard them as true or false. To think such a state true is to agree with it, and to think it false is to disagree. And if we neither agree nor disagree? Then our state is one of uncertainty; we haven’t made up our minds about the components. Still, we’ll think the state to be true or false in this sense: if we made up our minds on the components, we’d either agree or disagree. Our attitude toward the state thus acts like ordinary uncertainty as to whether a naturalistic claim is true or false.

Are restrictions like these beliefs? Scanlon worries that my account might not allow that they are. On this question, much will depend on what we mean by beliefs. In my 1990 book *Wise Choices*, I insisted that normative judgments are not beliefs, but by 2003 with my book *Thinking How to Live*, I realized that I wasn’t clear what this denial amounted to.<sup>7</sup> The restrictions I was talking about—restrictions on combinations of plans and naturalistic beliefs—have various earmarks of belief. One can agree or disagree with them, and voice their content in declarative sentences. They do, to be sure, have a special feature: they can be explained in the way I have been doing. Why, though, must that disqualify them as beliefs?

Often people distinguish beliefs from plans, intentions, desires, and the like by what's called "direction of fit". Beliefs have a "mind to world" direction of fit, in that the mind is to have the belief that fits how the world is. Plans have a "world to mind" direction of fit, in that the world is to be made to fit the plan one has in mind. Consider, though, the belief that I must go now. This has a direction of fit that is world to mind. The world is to be made to fit the belief, by my going. True, we can also say that it has the other direction of fit: my mind is to have the belief that I must go now just in case I must go now. What in the world this state of affairs is, though, is puzzling, this state of affairs that I must go now. Theorists are driven to saying mysteriously that it is a "non-natural" state of affairs. My account doesn't need such mysteries, and the other state of affairs—my going now—is straightforward. If, then, the restrictions I'm talking about don't qualify as beliefs because they have the wrong direction of fit, then my belief that I must go now fails to qualify on the same grounds. Or more precisely, it qualifies only at the cost of admitting non-natural states of affairs. We don't need to believe in such states of affairs, or if we do, it will simply be as what we are committed to by the kinds of restrictions I am describing.

My objection to non-naturalism, I should stress, is not to anything that all non-naturalists say. It is to leaving too much unexplained, or introducing explanations that are needlessly suspect. I agree with non-naturalists that we can't give a straight definition of 'must' or other normative terms. I offer, though, an oblique explanation, an explanation of what having normative beliefs consist in. The building blocks of my account are "planning" and restrictions on states of mind like planning. These, I say, are intelligible right off the bat in a way that musts and reasons are not. Until they are explained, musts are theoretical dangles in my systematic picture of the world. Having a plan is not a dangler, and restrictions on states of mind are not.

### **"Plans" and What Expressivism Gains**

Am I offering a real explanation? What can I say to explain having a plan in my sense? I must confess at the outset that I'm using the term 'plan' differently from the way we ordinarily do. In the ordinary sense, I'm not planning something unless I believe that, when the time comes, I'll do it. Consider a stock example of mine, the binge alcoholic who gets disastrously drunk every Saturday night and spends the rest of the week regretting it. He knows, alas, that come Saturday night, he will take a first drink and then another and then many more. In my sense, though, his plan for Saturday night is to keep strictly away from liquor. In the ordinary

sense, in contrast, this doesn't seriously qualify as a plan of his, because he believes he won't carry it out. His belief that he must shun the bottle, I can try saying, is what's left in planning apart from the belief that one will stick with one's plan and carry it out.

What, though, has been accomplished? Having a plan, the non-naturalist can now say, itself involves having a belief as to what one must do in the contingency planned for. Plans, then, can only be explained in terms of musts, and not the other way around. How can plans, in my sense, be explained without invoking musts?

One thing I have said about this may be indefensible. The proof of the plan is in the execution, I have thought. Suppose I restrict my plans to ones that include leaving for home at noon tomorrow. Then unless I don't stick to this restriction, at noon tomorrow I'll leave. But this leads to an objection. I might genuinely think at noon that I must leave right then, and fail to leave. That's what we call *akrasia*, or weakness of will. Scanlon pictures a case where I need to call my doctor to learn the results of a biopsy, which I dread.<sup>8</sup> I can firmly believe that I must call this instant, he says, and still not call. Now it seems to me that ordinarily in such a situation, as the moment to call arrives, I change my mind a little. I believe that I must call, but out of dread, I come to think "but not quite yet." Still, couldn't I believe firmly, "I must call this instant or it will be too late," and still not bring myself to call? I'd better accommodate this possibility—and once I do, do I have an explanation of the states of mind involved that isn't the non-naturalist's?

In *Wise Choices* in 1990, I speculated that we have a "normative control system" as part of our psychic makeup, but that it can be overwhelmed by appetite, embarrassment, dread, and the like. This fits more recent work in empirical psychology that supports what's called "dual process theory".<sup>9</sup> Without technical jargon, we can say this: Planning works in a characteristic way. We contemplate a situation we aren't in but might be in, think what to do in it, and then when the time comes, often do just that. Plans, we can say, are deliverances of this apparatus. Another feature of our psychic makeup is reasoning, and we can regiment what's involved as restricting our plans and naturalistic beliefs in certain ways. The restrictions I'm talking about are deliverances of these systems, which we characterize by their typical functioning. This account will allow that I can act in violation of a restriction that I accept. That just means that more than one control system bears on what I do—just as psychologists' dual process theory suggests.

Has all this explained anything, though, in a way that the non-naturalist can't match? Philosophers of mind call what I have given a "functional" account of beliefs about musts, an account which identifies these states

of mind by their role in a mental economy. The non-naturalist can equally well offer such a functional account of these beliefs as states of mind that we can identify by their functional role. Indeed if the account I have given is right, then this non-naturalist project has got to work too. I, after all, explain these beliefs as states of mind having a certain functional role, and if my explanation is right, the non-naturalist could just copy it for the states of mind he calls beliefs in independent reasons. Perhaps our explanations are just two ways of saying the same thing.

This functionalist non-naturalism, though, faces a worry that expressivism doesn't. The idea of functionalism for beliefs is that a state of belief is characterized by its place in a network of usual causes. Consider, though, J. L. Mackie when he propounded his error theory for morality. He wasn't doubting that moral beliefs have such functional roles. What, after all, was his objection to moral beliefs? He compared belief in morality to belief in witchcraft, but that doesn't seem to capture the proper worry. It's clear enough what it would be for there to be witches, even though there aren't any. Moral beliefs, though, he characterized as beliefs in properties with a built-in to-be-doneness, properties that we can detect. His telling objection must be that we lack all conception of what it would be for a property to have this built-in to-be-doneness. The whole idea is unintelligible. Now if the worry is that warrant and the like are unintelligible notions, it won't help to tell us that beliefs in warrant have a certain place in a mental network of causes. States of seeming belief can have such causal properties and still be unintelligible. What, then, would make a belief in warrant genuine and intelligible? Perhaps the non-naturalist can say, but we do need an answer to this. With plans and restrictions on plans, this problem loses its bite. Could I seriously worry that a plan to leave at noon is unintelligible? Could I seriously question the intelligibility of restrictions on my plans, such as my rejecting leaving after noon?

I don't mean that there's no downside to all this, but I'll have to be choosy about which problems I explore. In the rest of this lecture, I'll return to moral knowledge. I'll ask about some puzzles that claims to moral knowledge can raise. In particular, I'll ask whether we are forced to think that warrant and reasons to do things are all somehow mind-dependent, resting either on the responses of the beholder, or on the motives of the person who acts.

### **Cultural Differences and Mind-Independence**

My teacher Richard Brandt, in the late 1940's, spent a year studying the ethical thinking of some Hopi Indians. A central question he investigated was whether any ethical differences between Hopi and Euro-American

thinking were fundamental, rather than being grounded in differences on matters of non-ethical fact. He found almost none, but he did find one candidate he couldn't eliminate. Young Hopi men had played a game we might call chicken pull. It involved burying a chicken up to its neck in the ground, and then riding by on their horses and seeing who could pull the chicken out of the ground by its neck. The Hopi saw nothing wrong with this game. Brandt asked them whether the chicken felt pain, and they answered that it did, that a chicken feels pain in the same way we do. So the Hopi believed the non-normative things that Brandt's own community was convinced make such games morally wrong. But they didn't think the game in any way wrong.<sup>10</sup>

The facts that Brandt reports are more complex than my summary. I'll speak, though, of "Brandt's Hopi", and just stipulate that whatever the actual facts, these are hypothetical people who fit the picture I just sketched. We can take it, then, that if you or I had been brought up like Brandt's Hopi, we too would have seen nothing wrong with a game that hurts a chicken.

I myself am convinced that the fact that the game causes the chicken to experience severe pain is weighty reason not to play it, fun though the game must be. It is reason not to play it not only for people in my own community, but for Brandt's Hopi who see nothing wrong with the game and live in a community that sees nothing wrong with it. Here I'm talking about reasons in the normative sense, considerations that count in favor or against. This conviction of mine, I say, amounts to a plan for how to weigh considerations for the case of being one of Brandt's Hopi.

Is my conviction a case of knowledge? It's controversial among philosophers how to explain the concept of knowledge. One way, though, may be to try saying that knowledge is reliable belief. We can understand reliability as a normative notion: reliable belief is belief to rely on. We'll doubtless rely on our own judgments on matters like causing pain to animals, and I take it that we ought to rely on them. If I'm right about this, then our judgments may indeed qualify as knowledge.

Still, what are we to make of Brandt's Hopi? It's hard to see why they should be worse judges of the matter than we are, except in a question-begging way. Can we claim moral knowledge when their disbelief seems as well grounded as our belief?

Considerations like these convince some philosophers that all reasons must somehow be mind-dependent. Mind-dependence views can come in two broad versions. One holds that reasons to do things must depend on the motives of the person doing it. Reasons to spare a chicken suffering, in the case of Brandt's Hopi, must depend on their own sensibilities, their motives, feelings, and judgments. We can call this the *agent mind-dependence*

are justified in light of their sense of plausibility, as when they are confused and incoherent in their reasoning, but what's justified by way of beliefs will depend in part on what they find plausible.

The same goes for matters of natural fact. Take, for instance, whether life results from natural selection and is billions of years old. Our evidence is consistent with a hypothesis that I find bizarrely implausible: that a deceiving spirit, six thousand years ago, made the world with rock layers and fossils, junk DNA and various degrees of genetic similarity among species, and other such features, with the aim of producing a world that has all the apparent traces of a history billions of years old. Now it's a fact, I take it, that that's not how the history of our Earth went. This fact is not merely with respect to me and others who share some trust in most of standard scientific method. Things just didn't happen that way. Still, it's at least conceivable that someone who understood the evidence and arguments would find the deceiver/creator hypothesis more plausible than scientists' consensus on the matter. The two hypotheses, after all, equally well fit the evidence. So, indeed, does the puzzler we ran into in introductory philosophy, the hypothesis that everything came into being five minutes ago, after I started this lecture, with everything in place, including me with my seeming memories. I'll call my hypothetical character, the knowledgeable, coherent evolution denier, "Wilberforce". I don't know if any actual evolution deniers fit my stipulation of Wilberforce, but it's at least conceivable that one might. All this wouldn't, though, render standard scientific views true with respect to some people and not others.

I maintain also that the evidence available to scientists supports an earth billions of years old, and species formed by natural selection. It isn't evidence for these conclusions just with respect to some people but not with respect to Wilberforce. Still, it is indeed the case that by Wilberforce's lights, as I have stipulated him, this very totality of evidence supports the deceiver hypothesis.

We need to distinguish, then, what makes something wrong and—what makes something a reason—from what justifies our thinking the things we do on these questions. We must distinguish the basis of something's being wrong from the justification of a view that it's wrong. Justification can only be mind-dependent in some way, whereas bases for being wrong needn't hinge ultimately on human minds.

### **Darwinian Challenges**

Despite what I have been saying, Brandt's Hopi still raise a puzzle for moral realists. Suppose we are investigating a matter of ordinary natural fact, such as the frequency of disease in a population. If our method of

investigation isn't one that will somehow "track" the facts of the matter, it isn't to be relied on. A rumor that we expect would arise whether or not it was true, for instance, is no indication of truth. Also, if I know that another method of inquiry, equally reliable, would yield a different result, I shouldn't rely on the method of inquiry I happened to use. Suppose two well credentialed doctors regard each other as fools, and each, I know, would tell me something different. I then have no reason to believe the one I happen to consult, as opposed to the other. If there's a fact as to whether animal pain is worth avoiding, and if we and Brandt's Hopi are equally reliable indicators of that fact, there may be no more reason for me to rely on my own judgment than to rely on the judgment of one of them.

One version of such worries is argued by Sharon Street. Our proclivities to moral judgment were shaped by natural selection. But if moral facts are mind-independent, she argues, then there's no reason to think we would have been selected to get them right as such. Of course we, convinced as we are that pain is bad and loyalty good, will congratulate ourselves on being selected to think so. But no matter what the moral facts were, we would end up similarly congratulating ourselves on the discernment natural selection equipped us with.<sup>11</sup>

Brandt's Hopi disagree with me, and as I say, nothing non-question-begging disqualifies them as moral judges. Still, I can respond, in the end, I can only judge by my own lights. I do often trust the judgment of others, but ultimately it has to be by my own lights that I judge them trustworthy. Even so, however, I have to worry, Brandt's Hopi too must judge ultimately by their own lights. And we can't both be right. Aren't we again forced to conclude that all reasons to act are ultimately grounded in something about someone's mind—the person who does it or the person who judges?

According to my own theory of normative concepts, normative judgments are restrictions on plans and on combinations of plans and beliefs. Surely when I plan what to do, I have to go by my own lights. So when I judge questions of reasons or warrant, it has to be by my own lights. This goes for reasons to do things not only in my own case, but in the case of being one of Brandt's Hopi. I still must plan by my own lights, and so judge the warrant of their acts and responses by my own lights. I am judging irresponsibly, to be sure, if I don't learn what things are like for them and how the things they could do figure in their own lives and the sense of significance with which they live. These matters require great perspicacity, and I should be very cautious in judging what others ought to do, to believe, or to feel. These precautions, though, needn't preclude me from thinking Brandt's Hopi wrong to play the game they play.



What am I to say to Brandt's Hopi, though, once I'm convinced that there could be no way of reasoning them out of their indifference to hurting a chicken? I may try to work a transformation in their views by impassioned preaching and the like—and of course they can try the same sorts of things with me. What I can't do any longer, though, is to treat them as fellow inquirers into whether animal pain matters for what to do. I need to put my head together with others to think problems like this through, and I'd gladly put my head together with Brandt's Hopi to think through various other questions that perturb me. Perhaps, for instance, we can discuss, in such a spirit, the phenomena of different basic judgments in different cultures. With the moral significance of hurting animals, however, I may have to take a stance that, in my 1990 book *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, I labeled "parochial".<sup>12</sup>

Why, though, can't the normative realist now say exactly the same things? One can only rely, in the end, on one's own lights, and join in with people who one hopes can share one's inquiries. Other people, likewise going ultimately by their own lights, may come to different conclusions, and if they are set in their ways and coherent, one may have to take a stance toward them that is parochial. Still, by our own lights, there are reasons to do things that depend neither on the mind of the agent nor on the mind of the beholder. Being a reason is a relation between a consideration and thing a person might do, and this relation, the moral realist can say, is a matter of objective fact, sometimes independent of both agent and beholder.

Street's Darwinian dilemma, though, still besets this kind of moral realism. Ultimately I have to go by my own lights, true enough, but by my own lights, when I think about it, natural selection wouldn't make me an indicator of normative truth. Truth would have nothing systematic to do with what I judged to be true. All this looks like good news for opponents of normative realism.

Street poses a dilemma, though, not only for full-fledged normative realists, but for quasi-realists like me—this in an as yet unpublished paper.<sup>13</sup> We quasi-realists don't start out talking about properties and relations that are normative aspects of the world. We start with such things as plans and restrictions. The upshot, though, we claim, exactly mimics a normative realism. (When I talk about "normative realism" here, I'll always mean of the non-naturalistic kind.) That, however, raises a new dilemma. On the one horn, we might succeed in mimicking normative realism exactly. In that case, though, we must be susceptible to the Darwinian dilemma just as much as full-fledged normative realists are. On the other horn, we might avoid building the features into our view that render normative realism susceptible to the Darwinian dilemma. In

that case, we have failed in our aim of saving the features of normative realism that characterize ordinary normative thought.

### **Vast and Tempered Normative Realism**

We need, I think, to distinguish two kinds of non-naturalistic views whose proponents call themselves "moral realists". First, there's the view that moral truths and other normative truths are facts like any other, except that they aren't empirical, naturalistic truths. They differ from scientific truths in their subject matter, but not in the features that make scientific facts genuine facts. I'll call this *vast* normative realism. Such a view, though, won't stand up to scrutiny, I agree, for the kinds of reasons I have rehearsed. If moral facts are facts like any other, we have to explain how we are capable of knowing them, and how, if others disagree, they come to be less capable of knowing them. True, we can only go by our own lights. But with ordinary properties like the shapes of everyday objects, we arrive, by our own lights, at a story of how, though the evolution of our species design, we came to be capable of getting such things right. As for a modern science, it is an extension of common sense, but a culturally peculiar one stemming from Europe in the modern age and now spread throughout the world. (I recognize, of course, that it got its start with important influences from China, India, the Muslim world, and elsewhere, but still, as we know it, science is a culturally special development.) We can trust parts of science, by our lights, only if there's an account to be had of why the social processes that produce the findings would be reliable. Where there isn't, we ought to be skeptical, and if there never is, we are left with the paradoxes of extreme science studies skepticism. By these standards, our problem is, a realist who insists that normative facts are facts like any other dooms us to normative skepticism.

Normative realism usually, though, takes a more tempered form than I am describing. Whereas vast normative realism treats our judgments as indicators of facts separate from us, laying us open to the question of whether our judgments are truly indications at all of normative facts independent of us, any more than exotic judgments are, this tempered normative realism does no such thing. It cultivates standards for when normative judgments are to be trusted, but doesn't follow through on treating our judgments fully as indicators of independent facts. It rejects a perceptual model for how we get moral knowledge.<sup>14</sup> It denies that there could be basic normative facts radically beyond our power to know them.<sup>15</sup> As Ronald Dworkin, a tempered moral realist, says, "If you can't help believing something, steadily and wholeheartedly, you'd better believe it."<sup>16</sup> This isn't good advice to a detective investigating the fact of who

did a murder, absent an independently verifiable track record of correct crime-solving hunches. It may, though, be good advice to someone asking what's worth pursuing in life.

A vast normative realism holds normative facts up to the same epistemic standards as plain facts of our surroundings. Normative facts are bound to fail these tests. A half-way, tempered normative realism recognizes a gulf between these paradigm facts and normative facts. Normative facts, it holds, are independent of the beholder, and sometimes are independent of the aims and sensibilities of the people they apply to. Still, they needn't have all the epistemic credentials of paradigm facts.

Now that I have contrasted a vast normative realism with a halfway, tempered normative realism, you could ask me which kind I think we quasi-realists can mimic. The answer should be clear enough. Once we convince ourselves that we are products of the evolution and ecology of our species with its special cultural histories, we can't take a vast normative realism seriously. The only credible candidate for emulation is a tempered normative realism. I can now try saying this: A vast normative realism falls to Darwinian dilemmas and questions of why to think we can discern the normative facts and others can't. A tempered normative realism isn't so defeated, and that's the kind of normative realism we aim to mimic.

### **Quasi-Realism's Advantage**

Despite its cautious restraint, I don't think that this tempered realist position will quite hold up. Indeed if it did, we expressivists would face the challenge of why to be expressivists, in the normative realm, rather than straight normative realists of the tempered kind. Tempered normative realism, though, is unsatisfactory in itself. True enough, most of the views it takes can be interpreted as reasonable, via quasi-realism, but there is one aspect of it that can't be. Tempered realism still insists that normative facts are just as much facts as are the paradigms of facthood. They aren't in any way second rate as facts. If that's so, however, whence the tempering? The putative facts somehow don't entirely act like paradigm facts, but if their facthood is what's basic to them, why don't they? The wise realist will be a tempered one, I agree, but how shall we explain this need for tempering? The answer can't be that normative facts are simply facts like any other.

The tempered realist is asking about something he starts out thinking to be a fact, that pain in animals matters in itself. Its being a candidate fact is supposed to figure centrally in explaining how to judge it. Like the vast realist, then, he still must face a question: Should the fact that Brandt's

Hopi don't apprehend this fact shake my faith that I myself do? It still seems that it should, unless it's plausible that I'm better placed than they to think about such things.

What quasi-realism mimics is not tempered realism as a whole, but tempered realism in all but one aspect. Like the tempered realist, we quasi-realists can say that what makes the game of chicken-pull wrong is not our disapproval, and not some deep disquiet on the part of those who play it, but how it hurts the chicken. Like the tempered realist, we can say that we can only go by our own lights, even if by our own lights, we can't show ourselves better equipped for normative judgment than those with whom we disagree. We can't, though, mimic the claim that understanding normative properties and relations as objective matters of fact is basic to explaining how judgments of wrongness work. That, as I have said, isn't a credible claim.

Still, don't similar questions arise for plans? I plan to comment substantially on student papers when I could do something more fun and get away with cursory markings on the papers. This planning manifests my thinking it more important to fulfill my responsibilities and educate my students than to be having a good time. How do I know that it's more important? Thinking these things just consists, according to my account of normative claims, in planning to weigh some considerations more heavily than others in my decisions. But I think that a person could be mistaken in these weightings. I think Brandt's Hopi, for instance, were mistaken in giving no weight to the pain of chickens, even though they believed that the chicken's pain resembles our own. How do I know, then, that it isn't I myself who am mistaken?

I'll hold my plans up to standards that mimic, in some ways, epistemic standards for judging matters of scientific fact. I won't, for instance, trust an ethical judgment if I think that vivid and repeated contemplation of the non-ethical facts would lead me to change my mind. Such standards we might call a normative epistemology for moral and other normative judgments.<sup>17</sup> If this epistemology exactly emulates the realist's epistemology, I agree, it will be subject to the same refutations. But it doesn't exactly mimic a vast realist's epistemology. It does substantially mimic a halfway, tempered realism, but not the features that lead to the collapse of such a tempered realism. Rather, it mimics the features that bring tempered realism in line with common sense.

As a quasi-realist, I start out thinking my question to be how to live. I settle, among other things, on weighing animal pain in my decisions. I settle on this even for the hypothetical case of being one of Brandt's Hopi, who don't weigh animal pain into their choices. I may worry that I'd plan differently if I were one of Brandt's Hopi. Still, what pain is like weighs

much more heavily in my planning than do such worries. It weighs, by my lights, against causing such pain. Now ethical thoughts, on such a view, become very much like factual thoughts in some ways. That's a principal thesis the quasi-realist strives to establish. But ethical thoughts are like factual thoughts only in those ways that follow from the possibility of disagreement and other such features that ethical and factual thoughts share.

I conclude, then, that the tempered non-naturalistic realist runs into an anomaly that the quasi-realist doesn't. He starts out with ethical facts, and then has to worry why they aren't appropriately tested in all the ways that other facts can be. I say that the normative is fact-like in extensive ways, but its primary explanatory feature is that normative beliefs are restrictions on states of mind, on states of mind that combine naturalistic belief with plan. These needn't, though, have all the features of paradigm facts, even when they are true. They do turn out to have characteristic features that a tempered non-naturalistic realist accords them. Their being like paradigm facts, though, isn't what's doing the basic explaining. We quasi-realists have a different explanation of what the tempered non-natural realist claims. We mimic most of tempered realism, but on a different basis.

### **Moral Knowledge**

I set out to talk about moral knowledge, our knowledge of good and evil, but I haven't said much explicit about knowledge. A belief is knowledge if, in light of its features, it is a belief to rely on, and I have been exploring worries about relying on one's judgment in normative matters. Beliefs about reliability, on the account I am giving, themselves amount to plans to rely on some kinds of beliefs and not on others. In asking what we know, if this is right, we are engaged in planning our reliance on beliefs formed in certain ways. These plans amount to belief in a normative epistemology. I have been exploring possible grounds for a blanket distrust of all our normative judgments, and arguing that we can coherently go ahead and judge by our own lights, so long as we do so with due care. If need be, I have argued, we can depend ultimately on our own lights, even when we disagree with others, and legitimately count what we end up with as knowledge. If I am right in what I have been saying, then some of this will be knowledge of good and evil.

## Notes

1. Ewing, "A Suggested Non-Naturalistic Definition of Good" (1939).
2. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (1998).
3. By a convention adapted from Paul Horwich, I shall sometimes refer to concepts by using small caps.
4. Scanlon, *What We Owe* (1998), p. 17.
5. Scanlon, "Metaphysics and Morals" (2003), p. 17.
6. Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* (1984), p. 171 and elsewhere.
7. *My Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (1990) and *Thinking How to Live* (2003).
8. Scanlon, "Reasons and Decisions" (2006), p. 722.
9. On dual process theory, see, for example, Kahneman, "Maps of Bounded Rationality", and Chaiken and Trope, *Dual Process Theories* (1999).
10. Brandt, *Hopi Ethics* (1954), pp. 213–216.
11. Street, "Darwinian Dilemma" (2006).
12. Chaps. 12–13.
13. Street, "Mind-Independence" (2009).
14. Scanlon, "Metaphysics and Morals" (2003), p. 8; Dworkin, "Objectivity and Truth" (1996), pp. 104–105.
15. Nagel, *View from Nowhere* (1986), p. 139.
16. Dworkin, "Objectivity and Truth" (1996), p. 118.
17. For an example of such standards, see Brandt on his "qualified attitude method", *Ethical Theory* (1959), pp. 244–252.

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